

FIRST PERSON

My mother never read to me

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It is a miracle that we are both here today, writing this article, considering the rhetoric on literacy, particularly the published research on how to create literate students in schools (Debaryshe & Binder, 1994; Delpitt, 1995; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Leseman & De Jong, 1998; Meyer, Stahl, Wardrop, & Linn, 1994; West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993). For all intents and purposes, neither of us should have learned to read (much less write) given our circumstances of birth and the home conditions of our formative years. We came from homes where there were few books, our parents did not speak English, and we were not read to regularly. However, we have both achieved high levels of literacy—as evidenced by our accomplishments, past publications, and presentations—in spite of the predicted failure of our home environments to get us “ready” for school. We simply were not exposed to the 20-minute bedtime-story syndrome.

Parents are often reminded that if they read to them every night their children will grow up to be readers, love literature, and experience academic success in school. There are many studies to back up these claims that reading to children every day, from the time they are born, can have a positive effect on reading achievement later in life (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pelligrini, 1995; Heath, 1982; Lonigan, 1994; Moon & Wells, 1979; West et al., 1993; Velazquez, 1996). Traditions, common

wisdom, family, parent and library programs—all abound with tips and advice on creating the perfect home environment where readers will flourish if only the time is taken to read to children from an early age.

By sharing our personal narratives, we attempt to shed light on the many paths there are to literacy, especially when the gifts and talents that diverse families bring to education are honored and respected by caring and trusting educators. In our two stories we impart how our families’ hopes and dreams made a decided difference in our education, future success, and eventual academic achievement. No, our mothers did not read to us, but they provided a fertile pasture to feed our hopes and aspirations.

Zulmara’s story—The oral tradition

I am often dumbstruck by my own literacy. My mother never read to me, and yet I am an avid reader and writer. Because I come from a family that did not have many resources I did not own many books. I cannot remember owning more than three until I was in middle school. My mother spoke Portuguese, and we did not have many books in Portuguese either. My home, if studied by current literacy researchers, would be considered

a nonliterate environment. I grew up not being read to and not seeing anyone read or write.

My parents could both read and write, but I seldom saw them engage in these activities. When I was in grade school my father delivered the *Long Island Times* newspaper, but I do not ever remember seeing him read it. We did not own a typewriter, I do not remember having writing papers at home, and we had no printed posters hanging on the walls. Yet in spite of this literacy-impooverished environment, I grew up to be an avid reader. “Why?” my researcher’s mind kept asking. What was the essential difference that allowed me to succeed where the literature indicates that so many have failed? Why did I end up being an early reader, against all odds, when research says that early and avid readers are a result of the environment in which they grow up?

Family stories

Then it dawned on me: Even though we did not have books, magazines, or newspapers in the home, we did have a rich tradition of oral storytelling that my mom and dad kept alive. As a child I heard stories about my parents’ childhood in Brazil (the antics they participated in, relatives who were especially responsible, others who had shamed the family) and stories about their arrival and early life in the United States. They would tell these stories when looking at photographs, watching television, or just reminiscing at the dinner table about life in the old country.

Stories were shared not only with my sisters and me but also with friends and visiting family members. They were more than stories for children, they were elaborate retellings of what had happened to our family long ago—to the people who helped make us what we are today. Such stories laid the foundation for a strong family history, traditions, pride, and love of the country and the people we left behind. They were told with passion, rich vocabulary, and complex sentences. These were not simple emergent reader stories but stories that delved into the complexity of the

human mind and spirit. We children heard them over and over again. Some were poignant—like the ones about when my mom’s brother died, when her sister was taken ill before she passed away, and about the night of my grandfather’s death. Other stories were funny—like the ones about when my aunt snuck out of the house to go to a party (and her mom found out) and my mom and dad’s wedding day (and subsequent honeymoon and three-day reception party).

Not only did we hear many stories, but we also heard a lot of music, danced a lot of dances, and sang a lot of songs. We were taught many songs in Portuguese, and my mom delighted in having her 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old daughters perform for her friends. She taught us how to dance and sing to the songs of her childhood, providing for us a connection with her passion for life, her enthusiasm for her country of birth, and her excitement with the written and spoken word—especially when sung.

No, my parents never read me a bedtime story, but my aunt, an animated and gifted storyteller, told us stories about an imaginary horse every night. She would sit in the darkened bedroom I shared with my sisters and tell us about the antics of Kaka, an imaginary horse who got into all sorts of mischief. On some nights he would steal food and get caught, and on others he would do good deeds that were later discovered. He was a good-natured horse who became a friend as I readied for bed each night and anticipated hearing another chapter in his life.

I did not realize then that the oral tradition of storytelling that is so strong in many Latin and African cultures could be just as important as reading books to promote literacy and a love for reading and writing within the family. It is unfortunate that such an important literacy tradition is not acknowledged or made a part of U.S. schools’ instructional practices. As we work to honor and respect what other cultures have to offer, it behooves us to add not only oral storytelling but also music and singing to the list of activities that promote literacy within the families and

communities that we serve. These activities are just as important in promoting avid readers as the ritualistic 20-minute bedtime story.

Juan's story—*Kalimán, el Hombre Increíble*

My mother never read to me. She never read me books or bedtime stories. My family did not have a print-rich environment. We had no real books in our home, and I do not remember ever owning one. However, when I was about 5, I bought a comic book (*Kalimán, el Hombre Increíble*) with my own money—*centavos* I had saved just for this purpose. I was a Spanish speaker who lived in an area of rural México that was not much influenced by television or environmental print. The public school I was supposed to attend, which most of my siblings had attended (many had graduated from sixth grade), often lacked the most essential materials, making library books an extreme luxury. I “knew” school from the table talk of my older brothers and sisters and the homework assignments they often completed after the family chores. Nevertheless, when my mother first took me to school at the age of 7, the principal decided that I was not ready for school because I did not answer any of his questions. So I was sent home for another year, or until I learned how to say more.

When I finally did start school a year later, it lasted for only a few weeks because my parents decided to move the entire family to the United States in search of greater opportunities. I rarely attended one school for more than a year until I was in middle school. At that time my family decided to return to Calexico, California, for school every September after a nomadic summer of picking crops. With no preschool or elementary school experience until the age of 8, I faced a bleak prospect of underperformance and maladjustment in public schools.

By the time I left elementary school, however, I was mysteriously not only reading at grade

level but had also become an avid and highly motivated reader and writer. This transformation ostensibly occurred toward the end of second grade, at the age of 9, when there was a sudden and significant surge in my academic performance—I seemed to go from a nonreader to proficient reader of English practically overnight. My teachers were very pleased with these unexpected abilities and just assumed that I must have been a “late bloomer” who rapidly was able to “break the code” and discover the magic of reading.

Once my reading abilities in English were discovered, I went on to become biliterate—able to read, write, and speak fluently in English and Spanish. I achieved these high levels of literacy not in spite of my background but because of it. Although I did not follow the traditional print-rich pathway to literacy, I did come from a very literate home, one rich with words (written and spoken), folk tales, fables, legends, family histories, tragedies, music, and traditions. I realize now that the pathways to literacy are many, but unfortunately not all are cherished or even acknowledged in school settings or the traditional literacy canon.

Indeed, my first experiences with literacy were the family stories and folk tales that were told time and again around the campfire when we were out herding cattle, in farmworker campgrounds, or on those evenings when family and friends would visit. I still remember some of the stories vividly. They were told with intense passion and feeling about the events that made our family special and unique: stories about the treasure hidden on my grandmother's property and the time my uncle tried to dig it up, or about a distant cousin who made a pact with the devil. I heard multiple stories about early “Californios,” eccentric aunts, and the uncles who set out to find their fortunes in unfamiliar places. Many of the family stories were told through music, especially *corridos*—ballads that often recounted the exploits of certain heroes and events known to us.

Comic books

My pathway to literacy, though decidedly different from the norm, did involve reading—the reading of comic books. I loved comic books, especially the ones about *Kalimán, el Hombre Increíble*, who became one of my heroes. Kalimán, a follower of the Indian goddess Kali, was someone I emulated—strong, brave, compassionate, smart—and he had countless special abilities. As a small boy, I fantasized about becoming Kalimán when I grew up. I wanted to learn everything he had learned, master his special talents, and know the world the way he knew it, especially the different cities and locations where he did his many good deeds. You see, I imagined I might be doing the same some day.

During this time in my life I had two goals—buy as many issues of Kalimán comics as I could and have someone read them to me. This was no small task because I had no money, and my brother insisted on being paid for reading the stories to me. I can remember saving my hard earned money to buy the comic books. Each one cost a *peso*, and I would then pay my older brother another *peso* to read it to me. I quickly realized that if I could only read the stories myself I could buy twice as many comic books and not have to wait so long to get a new one. Therefore, Kalimán and my older brother became my first reading teachers. It amazed me when, pretty soon, I could read about Kalimán by myself. Because I could not afford very many, I often read the same comic books over and over again. Reading was fascinating to me. By age 6, I could read in Spanish very well, and yet my mother had never read me a bedtime story.

Although it was unrecognized by my public schools, I believe family stories and my hero, Kalimán, are what helped me learn to read and led to my eventual academic success.

Final thoughts

Neither of us had mothers who read to us; however, we did have families that cared and had

hopes and dreams of academic success for their children. We also had families where strong oral traditions of storytelling, family anecdotes, tall tales, and embellished legacies were the norm. Within those families we learned the nuances and intricacies of our home language, thus laying a foundation for the English literacy we would develop at U.S. schools.

As educators, we are impressed by the current reform movement in education. But the tradition of storytelling has been ignored, despite the positive impact it can have on educating children and making a difference in their lives (de la Luz Reyes, 1992; Delpit, 1995). A U.S. Department of Education (2002) publication on how parents can help their children become literate discusses correcting mistakes made in reading, quiet places to read, and checking for understanding, but it makes no mention of the oral tradition of storytelling and why it is important. It makes no mention of how to truly help diverse children become literate: by building on the strengths that families and communities have to offer.

We believe that schools need to cultivate a new literacy standard—various paths to becoming literate—that is aligned with the strengths and abilities of diverse communities. Effective schools should be judged by how many different paths to literacy they have created. Goodman (1997) stated,

I am convinced that it is extremely important to legitimize the concept of multiple roads to literacy. There is a tendency in the popular press, in schools, and in family literacy programs to consider that all people become literate in the same way. In much of the literature about how children learn to read and write there is an undue emphasis on the idea that the major or only road to literacy learning occurs when children are read to by their parents. This suggests to the society at large—and the suggestion becomes embedded in the culture—that being read to is the only aspect of literacy that counts as an influence on children's literacy development. (p. 56)

There are many different paths to literacy, especially within immigrant and minority

families where parents may not possess the skills to promote literacy in the traditional way. By implementing a literacy standard based on various paths to literacy, educators can then begin working on delineating the many ways of helping students become literate. For example, some families have rich oral traditions to capitalize on, others have storytellers within the family who regale members with their tales of days gone by, and still others use music or art to bring their stories alive in many different ways.

The oral tradition helped with literacy and made such a difference in our lives that we can trace our later success to the practices in what would be considered our "literacy impoverished homes." Although it may not be recognized in the popular literature, our parents and families did a few things right. They insisted that we maintain our primary language; therefore, we developed the deep structures of language. They told us stories in their language of passion, their language of success, their language of love. In doing so, they taught us the multiple ways that language can be used to express feelings, emotions, ideas, concerns, and knowledge. We heard flowery expressions, metaphors, dialogue, and deep structures as we listened to these family stories and internalized the language of our homes and ancestors. These family literacy experiences became the foundations for our future success.

No, we did not own books, and no one crawled into bed with us to read a story. But we did have families with oral strengths and the ability to spin a good tale, which kept us entertained and learning into all hours of the night. We have families that cared, and we both made it.

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